

MOVING PICTURES

'Torch Song' looks at subject of homosexuality

RECENT RELEASES:

On the assumption that you haven't had time to screen last week's eight new movies, the distributors only released two films this week — "Torch Song Trilogy" and "Full Moon in Blue Water," starring the ever-popular Gene Hackman, currently appearing in "Mississippi Burning."

Hackman shares with Michael Caine the distinction of "busiest actor in town." In recent years, each has appeared in six or more films. In an industry where they soon forget your name on the marquee is the name of the game.

At press time, no screenings had been scheduled for "Full Moon in Blue Water," but it is described as an R-rated comedy about the complicated relationships of four people whose lives revolve around the Blue Water Grill. Can it be "Mystic Pizza" with guys?

In addition to Hackman, the film stars Teri Garr, Burgess Meredith and Ellen Koteas.

"Torch Song Trilogy," (R) 112 minutes, has received wide coverage in the press. In case you haven't been reading the entertainment sections, this is Harvey Fierstein's sensitive dissertation of homosexuality in our society.

Based on his award-winning Broadway play, Fierstein wrote the screenplay and stars as Arnold Beckoff, a homosexual who believes closets are for clothes as he deals openly with his sexual preferences.

Matthew Broderick's appearance in the New York production led to his successful career in films. This time he plays Alan, a successful model who becomes Arnold's lover. There's also Arnold's bisexual lover, Eric (Brian Krieger).

For the most part, only Arnold's mother (Anne Bancroft) makes any impact — father and brother are just there. Edie's wife, Laurel (Karen Young) has some influence.

Arnold does well as a female impersonator, and the film's best moments are musical sequences in the club where he works as Virginia Hamm, a singer of the blues, those torch songs of the title.

Marvelous faces people that show of female impersonators, particularly the fat face of the "mistress" of ceremonies. The complete naturalness of these scenes is compelling and that genuine quality pervades the film's open attitude toward homosexuality.

With this unaffected naturalism, the club scenes rock of "Cabaret" and the decadence of German Expressionism in the '20s, save one thing. Smoke and dim lights notwithstanding, it's all too slick, too clean and neat, as are the back rooms where the boys go for a quickie.

Seldom do film characters look at the camera; that's the illusion of realism upon which film depends.

The assumption of "Torch Song" is that homosexuality is natural and society is at fault for not accepting it. No generative force for Arnold's homosexuality is presented, just his several statements that he always knew — plus a gratuitous

gulf that separates them. But Bancroft's performance is forced and shrill, almost a caricature of the New York Jewish mother, despite testimony to a fine family life. The vocal similarity just doesn't work and becomes irritating.

Hidden in Bancroft's performance is a split personality who either is or isn't responsible for her son. You can't it both ways, and the film gets murky when Bancroft becomes the villain for not accepting Arnold as he is.

With the two of them yelling at each other with roughly the same vocal qualities, it rubs harshly on the emotional appropriateness being forced to watch what goes on in their people's bathrooms.

The message we get from all this is mixed. The film makes a profound plea for tolerance of those who don't fit the norm. That and its fine music, fast-paced cutting, upbeat style and enthralling comedy are to its credit.

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the movies



Dan Greenberg

Grading the movies

A+	Top marks - sure to please
A	Close behind - excellent
A-	Still in running for top honors
B+	Pretty good stuff, not perfect
B	Good
B-	Good but notable deficiencies
C+	Just a cut above average
C	Mediocre
C-	Not so hot and slipping fast
D	The very best of the poor stuff
D-	It doesn't get much worse
F	Truly awful
Z	Reserved for the colossally bad
*	No advanced screening

But twice in "Torch Song Trilogy," Fierstein turns to the camera and speaks directly to us. In particular, the opening monologue in his dressing room effectively and touchingly describes the plight of homosexuals in a heterosexist world that is, at best, only tolerant.

Besides the unnaturally tidy scenes, the denouement of the film has several other jarringly inconsistencies, notably Arnold and Alan's choice of neighborhood after receiving approval to adopt a young boy.

While my legal expertise doesn't cover such situations, I'll assume that homosexuals are allowed to adopt homosexual boys, despite the lack of any explanation in the film. Certainly, the apartment to which they move seems out of place for the neighborhood. But, then, that's New York.

"Torch Song Trilogy" presents itself as a picture of the "miseries of homosexuality." The complete naturalness of these scenes is compelling and that genuine quality pervades the film's open attitude toward homosexuality.

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Arnold (Harvey Fierstein) and Alan (Matthew Broderick) share a quiet breakfast in a scene from "Torch Song Trilogy" from New Line Cinema.

opening scene where Ma discovers the "Young Arnold" (Benji Schulman) in drag.

Her Ma quickly registers surprise, understanding and acceptance. That, taken with the film's refusal to present causation for Arnold's homosexuality — in fact, there's considerable testimony that the family scene couldn't have been better — and Arnold's constant plea for openness and acceptance, leaves the clear indication that society is wrong for discriminating against a natural inclination.

My clinical standing is even lower than my legal, but it seems to me that there's a problem with that assumption. What we have is an obligation to guarantee the rights of all members — no matter how they chose to deviate from the norm, providing they don't harm others — that doesn't mean that everything is within the natural order of things.

Style reinforces concept and one way "Torch Song" proves that society is at fault for not accepting it. No generative force for Arnold's homosexuality is presented, just his several statements that he always knew — plus a gratuitous

gulf that separates them. But Bancroft's performance is forced and shrill, almost a caricature of the New York Jewish mother, despite testimony to a fine family life. The vocal similarity just doesn't work and becomes irritating.

Hidden in Bancroft's performance is a split personality who either is or isn't responsible for her son. You can't it both ways, and the film gets murky when Bancroft becomes the villain for not accepting Arnold as he is.

With the two of them yelling at each other with roughly the same vocal qualities, it rubs harshly on the emotional appropriateness being forced to watch what goes on in their people's bathrooms.

The message we get from all this is mixed. The film makes a profound plea for tolerance of those who don't fit the norm. That and its fine music, fast-paced cutting, upbeat style and enthralling comedy are to its credit.

However, the premise that homosexuality is normal is a little hard to take. Given problems in the last 30 minutes, "Torch Song Trilogy" probably will only play well to sophisticated, big-city audiences and the

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"The January Man" (R) 95 minutes.

Cliched but slick detective story with big-name cast.

"Lair of the White Worm" (R). Ken Russell's out there with the archeologists uncovering a strange skull with a bizarre past.

"Land Before Time" (A) 75 minutes.

Touching story of a group of young dinosaurs. Excellent animation.

"Mississippi Burnin'" (A+) 130 minutes.

Brilliant political film about human greed, fear and cruelty. A must see.

"My Stepmother Is an Alien" (B+) 105 minutes. When extra-terrestrial Kit (Basinger) touches down, this comedy takes off.

"Naked Gun" (D) (PG-13) 90 minutes.

Over-the-top farce that gets off the ground floor of the police-squad room.

"Oliver and Company" (A) 75 minutes. Disney animation at its best.

"Rala Man" (A+) 130 minutes.

Tom Cruise and Dustin Hoffman star as brothers in a tale of love and loss.

"Scrooged" (H+) (PG-13) 90 minutes.

Updated rump through Dickens' "Christmas Carol."

"Talk Radio" (B) (R) 110 minutes.

Talk-show host keeps his listeners at attention by offending and attacking their beliefs.

"Tequila Sunrise" (B+) (PG-13) 115 minutes. Slick, glib production gets lost trying for high-concept, high-tech look in an old-fashioned, hard-boiled detective.

It is spared nothing. He is mentally and physically abused and forced to witness unspeakably ugly, violent events. Because his cowardly, weak-willed father isn't up to the job, he must be his own parent.

As von Sydow plays him, he makes you wonder how poor Pelle has survived so long under his care. Nevertheless, the genuine love he conveys for the boy, a role well acted by Pelle Svendgaard, is evidently the very thing that enables Pelle not only to survive, but to conquer.

Good news, international film fans. The Park Theater in Windsor has tentative plans to reopen Feb. 1. Call 319-971-9983 for details.

"Pelle the Conqueror," a Danish film by director Bille August, is a quiet sort of masterpiece. Nothing about it. All its exquisite, craftsmanship elements of acting, scripting, cinematography and editing undoubtedly into an engrossing piece of storytelling.

The story it tells is one that seems increasingly popular with filmmakers in recent years. Like "Pride" and "Satyajit Ray's," it's a coming-of-age drama about a child who

isn't permitted much of a childhood, because he is poor and must fend for himself in a cruel, unfriendly world.

"Pelle" is taken from a series of novels, written by Danish author Martin Anderson Nero at the turn of the last century. It's about a young Swedish boy whose family has moved to a new town and begins to learn the ways of a working-class neighborhood.

It soon becomes apparent that Pelle's father doesn't know what he's talking about. Within a few hours, these two hapless, hungry immigrants have signed on at a Stone Farm, a horrid sort of slave labor camp where both children and parents work like dogs, and the only nice thing to eat is the fruit of a strawberry plant. Pelle's father brought over from Sweden.

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"Pelle" is a cult classic, featuring W.C. Fields, Burns and Allen, Bela Lugosi and Cab Calloway saying yes to drugs in his political satire "The Last Detail" (1973). Mediations, 7 p.m. Jan. 27. Modern Language Building, with a pre-Hayes talk about a call girl (Myrna Loy) who helps a lawyer (Warner Baxter) nail a gangster.

"The Cocoanuts" (1925), Cinema Guild, 7 p.m. Jan. 27. Angel Hall, with "Penthouse" (1933) at 8:45 p.m. and "International House" (1933) at 10:20 p.m. "Cocoanuts" is the divine Marx brothers' first feature. See Harpo sit a telephone, find out why a duck "Penthouse" is a racy, pre-Hayes talkie about a call girl (Myrna Loy) who helps a lawyer (Warner Baxter) nail a gangster.

"Spellbound" (1945), Cinema Guild, 7 p.m. Jan. 28. Angel Hall, with "Strangers on a Train" (1951) at 9 p.m. Freed from his neurotic Hitchcock mind, his theories in the psychological thriller "Spellbound," but it's worth seeing for its famous Salvador Dali dream sequence. Raymond Chandler wrote the screenplay with "Five Easy Pieces" (1970) at 9 p.m. "Detail," arguably Hal Ashby's best, concerns a dad, funny adventures of two Navy lifers (Jack Nicholson and Otis Young) to the brig. "Pieces," also with Nicholson, is Bob Rafelson's counter-cultural saga of a classical pianist turned blue-collar worker.

"The Thin Blue Line" (1988), 8:30 p.m. Jan. 28. Modern Language Building, Accclaimed puppet Co-op, 7 and 9:15 p.m. Jan. 28, Modern Language Building. Unpleasant, but intriguing French semi-fiction about a psychotic young man directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud.

"Metropolis" (1927), 8:30 p.m. Jan. 28. Modern Language Building. Unpleasant, but intriguing French semi-fiction about a psychotic young man directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud.

"The Last Emperor" (1987), 7:30 p.m. Jan. 28-29. Angel Hall. Peter Paolo Pasolini's rendering of the legend of the classical Greek murderer, with Maria Callas.

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN-DEARBORN, Recreation and Organization Center, 4901 Evergreen, Dearborn. Call 825-3390.

"All the King's Men" (1949) Mediations, 8 p.m. Jan. 28. Modern Language Building, with "Meet John Doe" (1941) at 9 p.m. "Men" is Robert Penn's Oscar-winning adaptation of Robert Penn Warren's novel about a power-mad Southern senator. "John Doe" is Frank Capra's story of an average Joe (Gary Cooper) cynically exploited by a newspaper publicity campaign.

"Monty Python and the Holy Grail" (1975), Alternative Action, 7:45 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. Jan. 28, Natural Science Auditorium. Mad parody of the King Arthur myth is far and above the best thing that Python ever did on film.

"Moses" (1971), Cinema II, 7 and 9 p.m. Jan. 29. Angel Hall. Peter Paolo Pasolini's rendering of the legend of the classical Greek murderer, with Maria Callas.

"Betty Blue" (1986), Ann Arbor Film Co-op, 7 and 9:15 p.m. Jan. 29, Modern Language Building. Unpleasant, but intriguing French semi-fiction about a psychotic young man directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud.

"Divas" (1987), 7:30 p.m. Jan. 29-30. Modern Language Building. Accclaimed puppet

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